

Holiday Food Preparation and Safety

Halloween has now come and gone, and many of us will soon begin planning and preparing meals for the very rapidly approaching holidays that follow. Regardless of origin, holidays are times of gathering together with family and friends, and the hosting of parties. In the rush (yes, you can even call it madness at times, we understand....!) to get everything just so for the guests, you can't forget to exercise care in providing what many parties have for the main event: food.

One of our fellow USDA agencies has a treasure of helpful fact sheets, and other resources available for your use in gearing up for these times. In this article, we will touch briefly on a few items, then provide the link to the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) web articles.

Why the worry?

The onset of foodborne illness can quickly ruin any holiday, whether Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or New Year's Eve. Most cases of illnesses can be traced back to either improperly cooked foods, or foods which have been out of refrigeration too long or not kept at a safe temperature while on a buffet line. Additionally, many cases can be caused by poor hand washing techniques, and cross contamination by the use of common utensils or dishes, and from raw or unwashed ingredients.

The onset of foodborne illness has three common symptoms; nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. If you are lucky, you may experience nausea only. Often, all three symptoms are present, and the severity will be dependent on the causative bacterial organism that flourished between the time it was prepared and was not stored properly, to the time it was served. For more information on the illnesses, the "Foodborne Illness and Disease" Fact Sheet, and "Safe Food Handling" from FSIS are good resources:
http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/index.asp

Lets' Talk Turkey

Actually the full title of this fact sheet from Poultry Preparation at the FSIS website is "Let's Talk Turkey—A Consumer Guide to Safely Roasting a Turkey". Holiday meals in many homes have turkey as the centerpiece item of the meal. Turkey must be prepared properly to avoid dangers from undercooking due to improper thawing, or from stuffing the bird. In addition to FSIS, safe turkey preparation information is readily available on the websites of marketers (such as Jennie-O, and Butterball), and many supermarket chains will also have printed materials handy, either at the poultry section or checkout. If you want information on how to safely deep fry turkeys, FSIS has that available for you also in the fact sheet: "Turkey: Alternative Routes to the Table".

Other Poultry Products

Chicken, duck, goose, Cornish game hens, and game birds often grace the table as well, either roasted, fried, or in favorite dishes such as chicken and dumplings. While many of the precautions for turkey hold true for other fowl such as proper refrigeration, thawing, and cooking thoroughly; recommended times and temperature for cooking may vary. A wide variety of tips can be found under the fact sheet topic: Poultry Preparation.

Cooking for Large Gatherings

While most if not all of us can cook for the immediate family, when the extended family and friends show up, or if cooking for a large events, we can often find ourselves taking shortcuts or not following good food handling practices. We get stressed; we run out of space to cook and work, the refrigerator is full, we're running out of utensils so instead of washing them they're wiped over with that towel hanging from the oven door handle that we just used to wipe up an egg that dropped on the counter top an hour earlier...the same towel that you've been wiping your hands with. Here is another page from the FSIS site that can help you, with a variety of topics to help you, even with getting the food ready to go over to Grandma's house: Seasonal Food Safety.

Basic Rules of Thumb

If the information from the Fact Sheets that are available on the website should be too much to remember; remember these basic rules and you should be reasonably safe from episodes of foodborne illnesses over the holidays.

1. Wash vegetables and fruits thoroughly before preparation, or serving if intended to fresh. With leafy greens such as kale, collards, mustards, pay close attention to the leafy folds which may hold soil.
2. Eggs and egg products are famous for being implicated in foodborne illness. Keep them refrigerated at 40 degrees Fahrenheit (F) or less (but not freezing) and cook thoroughly. Don't serve raw eggs. When buying, ensure they look clean, and none are broken. Items which are egg based, such as custards, flan, and whipped egg pie topping spoil quickly. Bake them promptly, then refrigerate or serve.
3. If you don't have a meat thermometer already, we hope you get one as an early present. To be safe from bacterial problems, all meats whether beef, pork, poultry or game should be cooked until the center reaches at least 165 degrees F and any juices present run clear. Ground meats need particular attention.
4. Dishes which should be served hot must be kept at 140 degrees or warmer (placing them in the oven at 200 degrees F to 220 degrees F should work) until ready to serve. Cautionary note: many household warming servers will only heat dishes to about 110 degrees.
5. Wash utensils such as knives, spatulas, as well as cutting boards between uses. Don't use them over again, especially if raw items are involved.

6. If your meal or buffet line has been all set up, and the family and guests are all content, remember this; if it hasn't been eaten or placed in the refrigerator for storage within two hours, throw it out. Don't try to save it.